

Open Burning and Air Quality

Due to cooler temperatures and higher humidity, restrictions in Ravalli County on open burning have been lifted, giving the go-ahead to people itching to torch their burn piles. In order to maintain safe burn piles, the following precautions must be taken:

1. People must call the Open Burning Hot Line (1-800-225-6779) to check dispersion and ventilation conditions.
2. All fires must be attended.
3. A water source or fire suppression must be present and available at the fire site.

But the danger of starting a grass or forest fire is only one concern related to open burning. Just as important is the issue of air quality. Burning wood waste generates smoke which may create or contribute to poor air quality. Such smoke may merely be a nuisance to some people, but to others, smoke is a dangerous pollutant triggering serious respiratory problems.

Burning wood waste from the average home or property is defined as “minor open burning” by the Department of Environmental Quality. Such burning may be conducted between March 1 and November 30 throughout Montana, unless local regulations prevent it.

In general, the best time to burn such wood waste is during times of good air circulation, i.e., when there’s a light breeze. A bad time to burn is when there’s no breeze at all. The reason burning is prohibited during the months of December, January and February is this period is typically characterized by poor air dispersion and ventilation.

What You Can and Can’t Burn

The only material that legally can be burned is wood waste from trees, shrubs and plants. Burning garbage and other types of waste material is prohibited. Examples of materials prohibited from open burning include: Styrofoam and other plastics (including plastic baling twine!); wastes generating noxious odors; wood and wood by-products that have been coated, painted, stained, treated or contaminated by a foreign substance (including plywood and particle board); poultry litter and animal wastes; tires and other rubber materials; asphalt shingles and tar paper; oil and other petroleum products; and paints, hazardous wastes and other chemicals.

Unfortunately, many of the aforementioned prohibited materials are burned regularly in the Bitterroot Valley either by people who don’t know that such burning is illegal or by people who know better but choose to burn them anyway. The reason that burning such materials is prohibited is that most, if not all, of the materials release noxious gases into the air upon being burned. These gases are much more toxic than regular wood smoke.

Options for Disposing of Prohibited Materials

Most non-hazardous waste, including plastic, Styrofoam and wood items, tires, construction waste, etc., can be placed in garbage containers or taken directly to the Victor transfer station. Used motor oil and other petroleum products can be taken to Lube Quick in Hamilton or Emerald Services in Missoula. Hazardous liquids such as oil-based paints, strong acids, strong bases and pesticides should be safely stored in containers and taken to a hazardous materials collection event.

Animal manures and poultry litter can be composted or spread directly on fields or pastures. Animal hides (beef, deer, elk, moose) can be taken to Pacific Recycling in Missoula. Paper products, including newspaper, white ledger paper, cardboard, magazines, catalogs and phone books, can be recycled locally at Ravalli Services or at Pacific Recycling in Missoula.

Options for Disposing of Wood Waste without Burning

Many items that can be legally burned can also be disposed of or utilized without affecting air quality. Trees and branches can be chip/shredded and used as a mulch for gardens or as a natural surface for garden pathways, playgrounds and driveways. Leaves can also be used as mulch or composted by mixing with animal manures or fresh grass clippings.

And rather than raking and bagging leaves in the fall, try leaving them in place and merely mowing the lawn without using the grass catcher. You may have to make two or more passes over the month or so that the leaves are falling, but the result will be a leaf-free lawn with no heavy bags to lug around and dispose of. The finely shredded leaves will add nutrients and organic matter to your lawn.

As air quality and drought become bigger issues in Ravalli County, we all need to look for ways to reduce burning and increase mulching. Recycling and reusing materials that we've traditionally burned or thrown away can save us money and help us all breathe a little easier.

In order to help citizens understand more clearly many of the environmental health issues in Ravalli County and the role of the Environmental Health Department in addressing these issues, our department will run a series of weekly newspaper articles titled "Environmental Health Talk."

In this ongoing series we hope to help raise the community's awareness of issues such as air and water quality and give readers useful tips on topics like recycling, collecting and disposing of hazardous materials and maintaining septic systems, just to name a few. To this end, we welcome public comment. If there's an environmental health issue you'd like us to address, write call or email the department: RCEH, c/o "EnviroHealth Talk," 215 South 4th St, Suite D, Hamilton MT 59840. Phone: 375-6571. Email: rdaniel@ravallicounty.mt.gov